

A Complex Hypothesis on the Historical Identity of Kobuleti: 2500 Years of Continuous History

Introduction

In traditional historiography, the origins of the city of Kobuleti are typically traced to the nineteenth century, coinciding with the Russian Empire's development of the region. However, a comprehensive analysis of geographical, archaeological, linguistic, and historical data supports a more nuanced hypothesis: that modern Kobuleti is the direct successor of one of the major ancient centers of Colchis, preserving an unbroken—albeit often tragic—continuity of settlement for over two and a half millennia.

This hypothesis posits that nineteenth-century Kobuleti did not emerge “from scratch,” but rather represented the revival, in a nearby location, of a once-flourishing ancient polis that had been obliterated by historical cataclysms.¹

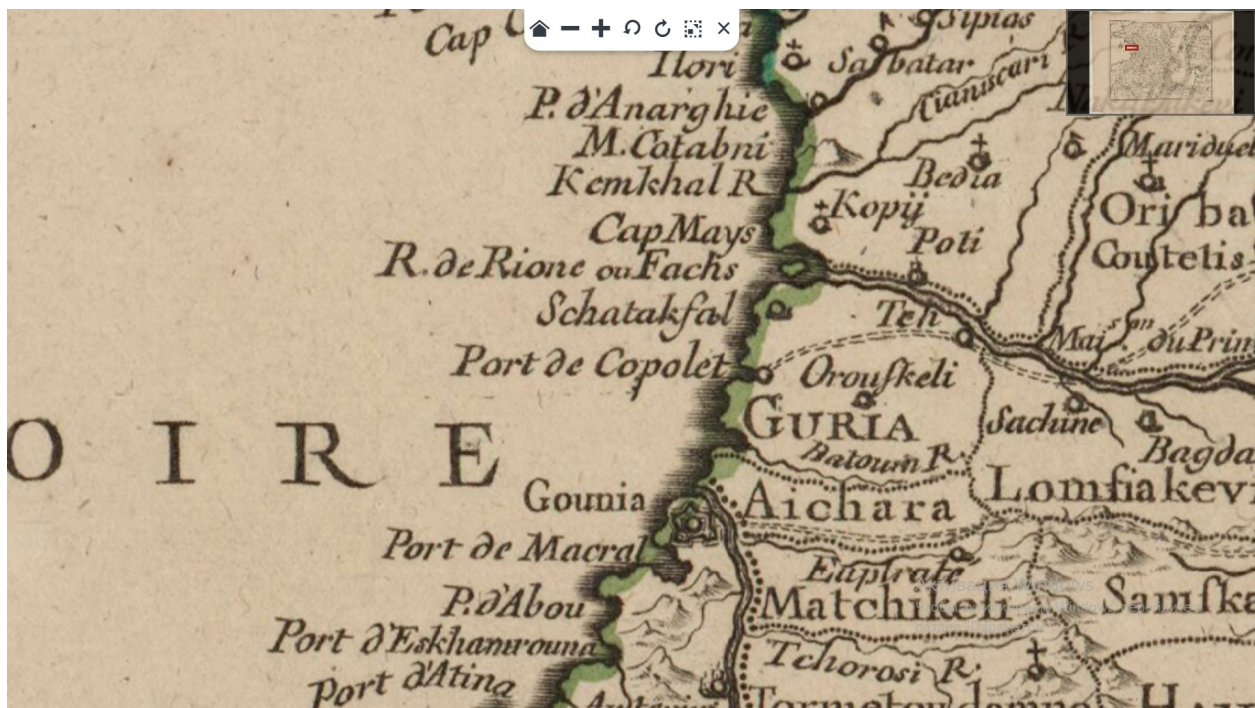
Section I. Foundation of the Hypothesis: Port and City

The hypothesis rests not on speculation, but on three pillars of empirical evidence:

first, the unique geography of the region;

second, the archaeological discoveries in the vicinity;

and third, historical documentation embedded in toponymic continuity.²



[Carte des Pays voisins de la Mer Caspiene , dressee pour l'usage du Roy / Sur la carte de cete Mer, faite par l'ordre du Czar, sur les Memoires manuscrits de Soskam -Sabbas, Prince de Georgie, sur ceux de Mr Crusius, Zurabek , et Fabritius Ambassadeurs a la Cour de Perse, et sur les eclarcissemens tirez d'un grand nombre de personnes intelligentes du pais . Assujetie aux observations astronomiques . Par Guillaume Delisle, Premier Geographe du Roy, de l'Academie Royale des Sciences. 15 Out 1723 ; Marin sculp](#)

[Delisle, Guillaume \(1675-1726\). Cartographe](#)

1. Archaeological Basis: Pichvnari as an Ancient Urban Center

The principal site supporting the existence of an ancient urban center in the region is the archaeological complex at Pichvnari. Strategically located in a naturally sheltered river harbor, the site offers compelling evidence of sustained international trade, developed artisanal production, and permanent architectural structures. Together, these findings leave little doubt that Pichvnari was once a thriving port city — the maritime gateway to ancient Colchis.³



Excavation of the Colchian burial ground at Pichvnari . Photo from the report of the Joint British–Georgian Pichvnari Expedition (Oxford–Batumi), 1998–2009. © University of Oxford.

1.1 Archaeological Basis: Pichvnari as an Ancient Urban Center

Excavations led by A. Yu. Kakhidze uncovered a vast necropolis — a kind of “passport” for the ancient city. Chronologically, its development can be divided into three key phases:

- **Eighth–sixth centuries BCE** – the period of dominance of aboriginal (Colchian) burials.
- **Sixth–third centuries BCE** – the era of Greco-Colchian synthesis, when mixed burials appear and Greek imports become widespread.

- **Third–first centuries BCE** – the Hellenistic phase, marked by deep integration into the broader Hellenistic world.

The archaeological evidence allows us to assert that Pichvnari functioned as:

- **A multicultural center:** Discoveries of both purely Greek and Colchian burials, as well as mixed interments, attest not merely to trade, but to sustained cohabitation and profound cultural integration.
- **A Black Sea trading hub:** A large quantity of imported ceramics has been unearthed, including black-glazed ware and amphorae bearing stamps from major Greek centers such as Miletus, Rhodes, Sinope, Chios, and Thasos. These findings demonstrate that the port actively participated in the pan-Pontic trade network.
- **A center of craftsmanship and construction:** Traces of local metallurgical production and fragments of tiles bearing Hellenistic stamps suggest the presence of monumental buildings — a hallmark of a fully developed urban settlement.⁴

Paradoxically, the renowned scholar Y. N. Voronov provides compelling confirmation of this synthesis. He observed that certain local artifacts, such as earrings from Pichvnari, had to be “rejuvenated” to the fifth century BCE, precisely because they were found in conjunction with securely dated Greek ceramics. This underscores that Greek and local Colchian cultures did not exist in parallel, but were deeply intertwined within a shared cultural space.⁵

If archaeology proves the city’s existence, geography answers the question of *why* it emerged — and *why here*, near the Choloki River, it flourished.⁶

1.2 Geographical Basis: The Natural Port of “Kolpos”

The key to understanding the region’s ancient development lies not in the rocky promontory of Tsikhisdziri (Petra), but in the unique hydrography at the confluence of the Choloki and Natanebi rivers. Before reaching the sea, the Choloki River runs approximately **one thousand three hundred meters** parallel to the coast, forming a naturally protected channel (or estuary), shielded from maritime storms by a coastal sandbar.

With a depth of **two to three meters** and gently sloping banks, the estuary was ideal for **side mooring and service of ancient ships**, while the slow current ensured safe anchorage. By contrast, the open mouth of the neighboring Natanebi River posed considerable danger during stormy weather.

This combination of factors rendered the mouth of the Choloki River a **first-class natural harbor** — the safest and most strategically positioned site for establishing the region’s primary seaport.⁷



Photograph taken by the author from a kayak on the Choloki River (Adjara, Georgia), looking upstream towards the Pichvnari region.

Section II. Strategic Advantage in Antiquity: Why Kobuleti and Not Batumi?

In antiquity, the port complex at Kobuleti (Pichvnari) offered significant strategic advantages over Batumi for eastbound trade caravans arriving via the Surami Pass.

- **Route difficulty:** The road from Kobuleti southward to Batumi was obstructed by two mountain passes, ravines, and red clay soils, which became impassable during rainy weather.
- **Time efficiency:** The route from the Surami Pass to Batumi was longer than the one to Kobuleti, adding at least a full day of travel for caravans — increasing both cost and risk.⁸

These factors made Kobuleti a more favorable logistical and economic choice for ancient trade.

Section III. Ancient Identity: Name and Origin (Sixth–First Centuries BCE)

The name of the modern city of Kobuleti is likely rooted in the geographical character of its ancient harbor. In Greek, the term kolpos (κόλπος) denotes a widening of a river that forms an enclosed bay — a formation strikingly similar to the estuary near the mouth of the Choloki River.

Over centuries, cartographic records have preserved traces of this toponym:

- On eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European maps, the area is labeled as Copolet or Copoleti.
- On the map by Guillaume Delisle, it is explicitly marked as *Port de Kopolet*.

In Ottoman documents, the same region is referred to as a liman, the Turkish term for “harbor.”

Linguistic Hypothesis: From Kolpos to Kobuleti

The modern name Kobuleti is likely the result of phonetic metathesis — the shifting of sounds and syllables as a word travels across languages and eras:

Greek Kolpos → European Copolet → Georgian/Laz Kobuleti

Thus, the very name of the city may still bear the imprint of its maritime origin, evolving in form but retaining its essential meaning: “bay.”

On Toponymic Continuity and Phonetic Adaptation

Across languages and civilizations, toponyms often undergo adaptation, preserving their core meaning even as their forms change. Examples include:

- Amsterdam: derived from “dam on the Amstel River,”
- Liverpool: from “muddy pool” (liver = silt or sludge + pool),
- Mikroliman (Greece): literally “small port.”

Such transformations typically reflect a location’s geographical function or strategic role. The transition from *Kolpos* to *Copolet* to *Kobuleti* is not an anomaly, but a classic instance of toponymic transplantation — a process in which a place name evolves phonetically and semantically within new linguistic environments while retaining its identity.

Supported by linguistics, geography, and historical cartography, this etymological trajectory strengthens the hypothesis that modern Kobuleti is the legitimate successor to ancient Kolpos. Its name, like a fossilized echo, anchors the city within the enduring historical and cultural continuum of the Black Sea region.



David Rumsey Historical Map Collection. Kitchin, Thomas. (Europe divided into its empires, kingdoms, states, republics, &c. Southern States) 1778

Section IV. The Age of Empires: Rome and Byzantium

1. The Subjugation of Colchis by Rome and the Strategic Importance of Kobuleti (Sixty-Five BCE)

By sixty-five BCE, the era of the Pontic Kingdom's dominance in the Black Sea was drawing to a close. It was being replaced by a new, seemingly invincible force: Rome. To establish full control over the region, Rome needed to subordinate all strategically significant territories — and Colchis, with its maritime infrastructure and fleet, was one of the most critical targets.

The Roman campaign led by Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great) served as the principal instrument of this subjugation.¹¹

A key objective of the campaign was the neutralization of the Colchian naval power, which had previously served King Mithridates VI of Pontus. Roman military strategy at the time focused on gaining absolute control over maritime routes. As Cassius Dio recounts, Pompey ordered the Roman fleet to blockade Mithridates entirely, preventing any naval movements or the importation of supplies:

“...he ordered the fleet to blockade Mithridates so that he could not sail anywhere and so as not to allow him to import supplies.”¹²

Plutarch, too, underscores the scale of this naval encirclement, describing a blockade stretching along the entire coast “as far as the Bosphorus.”¹³

For such a maritime operation to succeed, the Romans required direct control over every harbor where enemy vessels might find refuge or resupply. From this perspective, the capture of the harbor

at Kolpos — later known as Kobuleti — was not merely a tactical possibility, but a strategic necessity in Pompey's broader campaign to dismantle the last remnants of the Pontic fleet.¹⁴



Visualization of Pompey's Campaign

Route of Pompey's campaign through Armenia, Colchis, and Caucasian Albania, based on ancient sources. Adapted from Ali Albanvi, "On the Localization of the Albanian City of Khalhal," Proza.ru (2023). URL: <https://proza.ru/2023/01/01/559>

Consolidation of Naval Control and Strategic Objectives

The culmination of Pompey's campaign was the complete subjugation of the Colchian naval forces. The most authoritative confirmation of this comes from a contemporary of the events — the Roman orator Marcus Tullius Cicero. In one of his speeches, he refers to the event as common knowledge:

"Pompeius classis Alexandrinae et Colchicae et Bithynicae praefectos constituit..."
(Pompey appointed the commanders of the Alexandrian, Colchian, and Bithynian fleets.)¹⁵

This phrase confirms that the *classis Colchica* (Colchian fleet) was not merely defeated, but formally absorbed into the Roman military system through the appointment of Roman prefects. Such administrative control would have been impossible without capturing the fleet's key bases — primarily the natural harbor of Kobuleti (Kolpos).

The conquest of Colchis was part of a wider Roman geopolitical strategy to secure dominance across the Caucasus. As noted by historian Ya. A. Manandyan, Pompey aimed "to expand his sphere of influence along the Caucasus to the Caspian Sea."¹⁶

Control over the Colchian ports offered Rome not only strategic naval bases but also critical access to regional trade routes. Strabo affirms that following Mithridates' defeat, all his territories, including Colchis, were absorbed into the Roman system.¹⁷

Chapter Conclusion

The subjugation of Colchis in sixty-five BCE was not an incidental result of military activity but a deliberate act of imperial expansion. Rome's consolidation of maritime infrastructure — with the seizure of key harbors like ancient Kolpos (Kobuleti) — marked the beginning of a new era in the eastern Black Sea region. From that moment, Kobuleti became a strategic maritime asset within the Roman dominion.¹⁸

Chapter V. The Rock Above Kolpos: From Lighthouse to Byzantine Citadel

Archaeological investigations in the area of Tsikhisdziri (ancient Petra) reveal cultural strata predating the construction of the Byzantine fortress in the sixth century CE. These early layers include ash deposits, ceramic fragments, and traces of utilitarian structures — suggesting not a city, but a functional outpost.

The absence of fortifications or defensive architecture points to the likely function of the site as a **navigation beacon**. The elevated rocky promontory, visible from great distances at sea, would have served as an ideal platform for a signal fire. This lighthouse-like facility likely guided ships safely into the harbor at the mouth of the Choloki River — the ancient port of Kolpos.

According to archaeological data, a small settlement of lighthouse keepers may have existed on the cape long before the establishment of Byzantine Petra, serving maritime routes that were central to eastern Colchis.¹⁹



General view of the archaeological area of Petra Fortress (Tsikhisdziri), Adjara. Photo from the report on archaeological excavations published as part of a project under the auspices of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia.

Chapter V (continued). The Rock Above Kolpos: From Lighthouse to Byzantine Citadel

The location where the fortress of Petra was later constructed possessed unique natural defenses. To the east stretched swampy lowlands, to the west — the sea, and to the north — a river that linked these two natural barriers. This configuration created a narrow corridor — a geographical “bottleneck” — through which the only viable land route passed. This road connected the harbor of Kolpos (modern Kobuleti) with the interior of Colchis. Rising at the southern end of this corridor, approximately five kilometers from the harbor’s edge, stood a steep rock — an ideal vantage point to monitor and control movement along this vital passage.²⁰

The Byzantine transformation of this site began under Emperor **Justinian I**. According to **Procopius of Caesarea**,

“Justinian ordered the construction of a fortress in Lazica called Petra, because all the trade of the Laz went this way.”²¹

The fortress was not intended as a city, but as a **military citadel**, enforcing control over the only land corridor between the interior and the Black Sea — the very artery through which all commerce to and from Kolpos passed.

To tighten this control, the emperor appointed **John Tzibus** (also known as John Tiurus or Tsib) as governor of Petra. He established a **monopoly over all trade**, forbidding any commercial activity outside the fortress walls. Prices were fixed by decree and heavily skewed in Byzantium’s favor, particularly for vital imports such as **salt, wine, and olive oil**. This draconian interference provoked **deep resentment** among the Laz nobility and merchant class.

As a result, **King Gubaz II of Lazica** rebelled. He forged an alliance with the **Sasanian Empire**, sparking the **Lazic War** (five hundred forty-one to five hundred sixty-two CE). During the course of the war, the fortress of Petra changed hands multiple times. However, even Persian support did not stabilize the region. Disillusioned, Gubaz II turned once more to Byzantium. But soon after, he was **assassinated** by Byzantine generals in an act of treachery. The emperor ordered their execution, but the **political vacuum** and instability lingered.²²

After the conclusion of the war, Petra’s fate was sealed. As reported by Procopius, the **walls of Petra were dismantled by imperial decree**. The goal was to prevent either Persia or disloyal allies from using it as a strategic stronghold or tool of coercion in the future.

Thus, the rocky outcrop that once served as a **beacon for sailors**, and later as a **symbol of imperial might**, was reduced to **silent ruin** — no longer a citadel, but a memory of monopoly and failed domination.

Chapter VI : Ottoman Rule in the Kobuleti Region (16th – 19th Centuries)

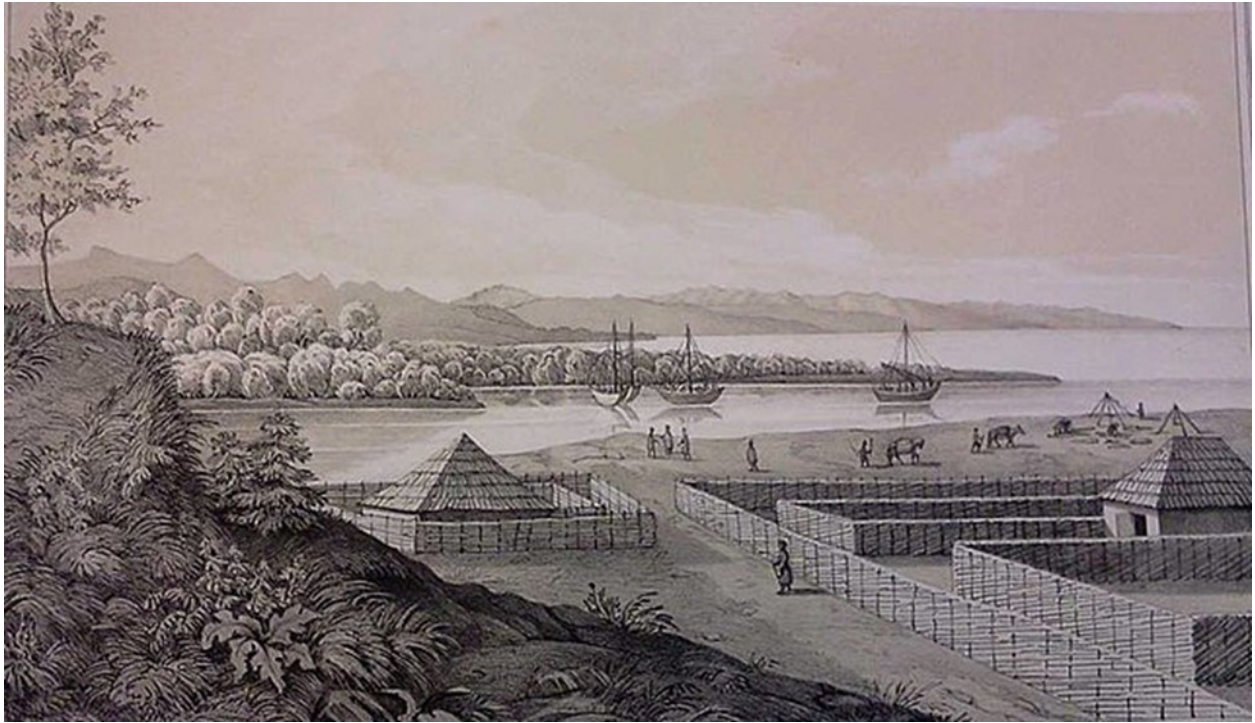
Ottoman rule in the coastal areas of western Georgia, including modern Kobuleti, lasted for almost three centuries and left a deep mark on the history of the region. The beginning of systematic Ottoman invasion dates back to the mid- 16th century and is associated with the decline of Byzantine influence and the weakening of the Georgian kingdom, especially after the collapse of the unified state in the 15th century.²³



Image of the Black Sea coast. Illustration from the manuscript " *Relatione della Georgia* " Cristoforo de Castelli, 1632-1654 (*Biblioteca Apostolic Vatican*).

Establishment of Ottoman control

The first Ottoman military operations in Adjara and Guria began in the 1540s. The fortress of Batum was captured as early as 1547, and over the next decades control extended to coastal territories, including Chorokhi, Kobuleti, and Choloki. Despite resistance from local feudal lords, including the Gurian princes, Ottoman influence became definitive in the early 17th century. By 1614, the Ottoman Empire had consolidated administrative control over most of the region, incorporating it into the Akhaltsikhe Pashalik.²⁴



Dubois de Montpéroux , Frederic. *Voyage autour du Caucase , chez les Tcherkesses et les Abkhases, en Colchide , en George , en Armenia and Crime* . Atlas , tome V. Paris : Guide et J. Baudry , 1839–1843.

Unlike previous conflicts, including the Laz War of the 16th century, the fighting in the mid- 19th century was accompanied by extensive use of artillery. The use of field and naval siege artillery made this war significantly more destructive to coastal infrastructure. Burning settlements, destroyed bridges and fortifications, abandoned villages - these were the consequences of the use of cannons in the relatively limited space of the Black Sea coast.²⁸



Fort Shefketil Taken by Assault.

Chromolithograph depicting the storming of the Russian fort Shefketil (Shekvetili) by the Ottoman army during the Crimean War, 15 November 1853. Anonymous artist, mid-19th century. Source: private collection / historical print archive.

Around the same time, the fortified point of Choroksu emerged in the southern part of Kobuleti, at the mouth of the Kintrishi River, as a new line of defense and logistics for the Ottoman army. Its appearance indicates a shift in the line of contact between the parties. It also suggests that the previous defense or transport lines in the Pichvnari and Choloki area were destroyed during the fighting or lost their strategic importance. A comparison of nineteenth-century cartographic sources shows that the names Kopolet and Fort St. Nicholas never appear simultaneously. This circumstance, along with the appearance of the Choroksu fortification at the mouth of the Kintrishi on Ottoman maps, suggests that the previous settlement, caught between two warring systems—Russian and Ottoman—was destroyed and abandoned by its inhabitants. Most likely, the city found itself under crossfire and lost its importance, giving way to new defensive configurations.²⁹



1870 Road Map Caucasian Edges 1:840K

End of the Ottoman period

The final end of Ottoman rule occurred in 1878 following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. In accordance with the terms of the Berlin Congress, Batumi, Kobuleti and all of Adjara were transferred to the Russian Empire. Fortresses, including Petra and the fortifications at Choloki, were partially destroyed or lost their military significance. A new stage of administrative and cultural integration of the region into the Russian Empire began.³⁰

Thus, the Ottoman presence in Kobuleti lasted from approximately 1547 to 1878, spanning about three centuries. This period is characterized as a time of complex transformation: Islamization, military conflicts and border control, but also the formation of a unique local identity, combining Georgian, Ottoman and Black Sea elements.³¹

Chapter VII . The Russian Empire and the Birth of a Resort: From a War Zone to a Subtropical Dream

With the end of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 and the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, Kobuleti, Batumi and all of Adjara went to the Russian Empire. This moment became a turning point in the history of the region, marking the beginning of a new stage - administrative stabilization, infrastructure construction and a resort future.³²

Military border zone

Initially, Kobuleti, like all of southern Adjara, had a border regime. It was a military zone designed to protect the southern borders of the empire from a possible revenge by the Ottoman Porte. The Russian authorities built a system of garrisons and forts, including the restoration of Fort St. Nicholas at the

mouth of the Choloka. At the same time, the postal and road infrastructure was strengthened: roads were built connecting Batumi with Poti and Tiflis, and preparations began for the construction of a railway that would eventually pass through Kobuleti and become the artery of the region.³³

Choroksu becomes Kobuleti

During these years, the Ottoman name Çü r ü ksu (rotten water) disappeared, and the Georgian and imperial form Kobuleti appeared. This change reflected not only an administrative transformation, but also a symbolic one: the region had to be cleared of the memory of three centuries of Turkish presence.³⁴

Generals' dachas and elite development of the coast

By the end of the nineteenth century, the resort development of the region began, but only for the elite. The coastline in the Kobuleti area was given over to high-ranking officials, generals and merchants. So-called generals' dachas appeared here - summer residences built in eucalyptus groves, on the seashore, surrounded by pines and magnolias. These dachas often had private beaches, gazebos and piers. Thus, Kobuleti became a closed resort for the Russian elite, not yet receiving the status of a national resort, as in Soviet times, but already forming the image of a place where climate, silence and status are combined.³⁵

The station that opened its doors

At the beginning of the twentieth century, after the opening of the Baku-Batumi railway route, a railway station was built in Kobuleti, and the city was included in the transport network of the empire. This event radically changed the character of the village: dachas became accessible not only by trails and horses, but also by train, in a matter of hours from Batumi or Tiflis. Active resettlement of Russian, Armenian and Georgian families began, schools, post offices, warehouses, tea houses and the first primitive boarding houses were opened. From a military zone, Kobuleti turned into a quiet subtropical village with resort potential.³⁶

Chapter conclusion: The Russian Empire not only liberated Kobuleti from the Ottomans, but also laid the foundation for its resort destiny. The railway, the station, the generals' dachas, the new administrative model and the rejection of the Ottoman toponym created the basis on which the all-Union health resort would later grow. It was an era of rebirth: Kobuleti rose from the ruins like a phoenix - first as a military garrison, then as a recreation area for the elite, and finally as a future health resort for the entire people.³⁷

Chapter VIII . Return of the Center: Soviet Power and the Resort of Kobuleti

With the establishment of Soviet power in Adjara, a new stage in the life of Kobuleti began - the city, almost forgotten after centuries of Ottoman occupation, returned to the focus of political and resort attention. After the signing of the Kars Treaty of 1921, Adjara became part of Soviet Georgia as an autonomous republic. Kobuleti was included in the administrative system, and in 1930 it was officially given the status of a district center. However, in the early 1960s of the 20th century, a temporary shift of the administrative center occurred - as part of the territorial reform, the so-called Chakva district was created, with the transfer of the center to the coastal village of Chakvi. This experiment turned out to be ineffective: the rapid development of sanatorium and resort infrastructure, the construction of boarding

houses and rest homes took place in Kobuleti, and not in Chakvi. The remoteness of the new center from actual economic activity created problems in management, logistics and tourism. As a result, already in 1964, the center was returned to Kobuleti, which symbolically marked the return of the city's status as the leading resort of Western Georgia.³⁸

In 1923, Kobuleti received official resort status, and since 1944, city status. This marked the beginning of a large-scale program for the construction of resort infrastructure: sanatoriums, rest homes, and hospitals were created, aimed at citizens from all over the Soviet Union. The favorable climate, warm sea, and proximity to Batumi made Kobuleti the most popular Black Sea holiday destination.³⁹

The Soviet model of recreation assumed mass character and accessibility. Kobuleti became not just a resort for the elite, as in the Russian Empire, but an all-Union health resort, where tens of thousands of vacationers arrived every year. Trains flocked here, tourist routes were directed here, festivals and sporting events were held here. The area turned into a showcase of Soviet resort policy. By the end of the seventies, the city had several dozen health resorts, including specialized institutions for children, the military, and employees of the Union ministries.⁴⁰ The agricultural base also strengthened: Kobuleti became the center of the tea, citrus and essential oil industries.⁴¹

Thus, during the Soviet period, Kobuleti not only regained the significance it had lost during the Ottoman era, but also acquired a new, socially oriented identity – a resort for the people, a center for recreation and health improvement, where the sea, climate and ideology met.⁴²

Chapter IX . From Collapse to Revival: Kobuleti in the Post-Soviet Period

With Georgia's independence in 1991, a new, controversial chapter began in Kobuleti's history. The collapse of the Soviet Union, accompanied by economic collapse, civil conflict and political instability, led to a deep crisis in the region's tourism industry.⁴³

Tourism stagnation and infrastructure degradation

During the nineties, most of the sanatoriums, boarding houses and holiday homes that had previously belonged to trade unions, ministries and departments of the USSR were closed, abandoned or privatized without effective management. The infrastructure was destroyed, the city lost its former status as a resort, and the flow of vacationers was reduced to a minimum. Abandoned buildings, a halt in investment and a massive outflow of personnel created an atmosphere of decline. Against the backdrop of the general economic disintegration of the country, Kobuleti found itself on the periphery of new priorities.⁴⁴

New Phase: From Rose Revolution to Revival

The turning point came after the events of the Rose Revolution in 2003. The new course for modernization and European integration was accompanied by a program for the revival of tourist zones. Adjara, as an autonomous republic, received special attention in strategic initiatives for the development of the Black Sea coast. Large-scale reconstruction began in Kobuleti: beaches were restored, embankments were renovated, and modern tourist infrastructure was created. Private hotels, cafes, and shopping areas were opened. Roads were restored, rail links were improved, and private investment in the hospitality and agrotourism sectors appeared.⁴⁵

Current state

Today, Kobuleti is once again strengthening its reputation as a resort with a unique climate, long beaches, and a diverse hotel sector, from family-run guesthouses to modern apart-hotels. The infrastructure continues to develop, and the tourist flow is steadily growing, both due to domestic and foreign guests. Kobuleti has undergone a transformation from an industrial resort of the Soviet era to a flexible, partially self-governing tourist cluster, actively integrated into national development strategies.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Thus, the history of Kobuleti is the history of an unbroken 2,500-year continuity. It is the history of a single urban and economic complex that consisted of the port city of Pichvnari (Kolpos) and its military-navigational outpost on the rock of Petra. This center was wiped off the face of the earth, probably during the Ottoman conquests, and was reborn in the 19th century in a new, nearby place, but retained its ancient name, meaning "Bay". The modern city is the legitimate heir to one of the most important poles of ancient Colchis.⁴⁷

Notes

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